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Transcript:

Welcome.
I'm glad you're here.

This is *Orthodoxy* by G. K. Chesterton, using the Project Gutenberg edition—read slowly, aloud, and in company.

These readings aren't lectures, and they aren't explanations. They're an invitation: to listen carefully, to follow an argument that wanders on purpose, and to allow surprise to do some of the work. So let's take our time—and begin where Chesterton leads us today.

In this first reading from *Orthodoxy*, we meet Chesterton as he begins to unravel the first paradox of the book. Remember that a paradox is a statement or situation that appears contradictory or absurd at first glance, but reveals a deeper truth when examined more carefully. Without that idea before us, we will never fully appreciate Chesterton.

Maybe an opening image is the best way to grasp what he has to offer.

Think of the old television comedy *Gilligan's Island*. You set out for a three-hour tour—a small, ordinary journey, with a known route and an expected ending. The sea is calm. Nothing remarkable is supposed to happen. And then the weather turns rough, the tiny ship is lost, and you are suddenly nowhere you expected to be.

Disoriented, you spot land in the distance and head for it. It looks uncharted—some anonymous island. You land, build shelter, find water, crack open coconuts, and settle in. This strange place becomes your new home.

You even give it a name.

But something feels odd. One day, while exploring, you notice something slipping away into the distance. It isn't an animal. It's a road. You follow it, and soon you come to a sign welcoming you—not to an unknown island—but back to civilization. You haven't discovered a new land at all. You've discovered home again, for the first time.

After so long in the wilderness, even the simplest things feel miraculous. Running water. A hot meal. Light at the flip of a switch. What was once ordinary is now radiant. What was familiar has become wondrous.

That is Chesterton's claim.

Let's read him together.

CHAPTER I.—*Introduction in Defence of Everything Else*

The only possible excuse for this book is that it is an answer to a challenge. Even a bad shot is dignified when he accepts a duel. When, some time ago, I published a series of hasty but sincere papers under the name of "Heretics," several critics, for whose intellect I have a warm respect (I may mention specially Mr. G. S. Street), said that it was all very well for me to tell everybody to affirm his cosmic theory, but that I had carefully avoided supporting my precepts with example. "I will begin to worry about my philosophy," said Mr. Street, "when Mr. Chesterton has given us his." It was perhaps an incautious suggestion to make to a person only too ready to write books upon the feeblest provocation. But, after all, though Mr. Street has inspired and created this book, he need not read it. If he does read it, he will find that, in its pages, I have attempted, in a vague and personal way—in a set of mental pictures rather than in a series of deductions—to state the philosophy in which I have come to believe. I will not call it my philosophy; for I did not make it. God and humanity made it—and it made me.

I have often had a fancy for writing a romance about an English yachtsman who slightly miscalculated his course, and discovered England under the impression that it was a new island in the South Seas. I always find, however, that I am either too busy or too lazy to write this fine work; so I may as well give it away for the purposes of philosophical illustration. There will probably be a general impression that the man who landed—armed to the teeth and talking by signs—to plant the British flag on that barbaric temple which turned out to be the Pavilion at Brighton, felt rather a fool. I am not here concerned to deny that he looked a fool. But if you imagine that he felt a fool—or, at any rate, that the sense of folly was his sole or his dominant emotion—then you have not studied with sufficient delicacy the rich romantic nature of the hero of this tale. His mistake was really a most enviable mistake; and he knew it, if he was the man I take him for. What could be

more delightful than to have, in the same few minutes, all the fascinating terrors of going abroad combined with all the humane security of coming home again? What could be better than to have all the fun of discovering South Africa, without the disgusting necessity of landing there? What could be more glorious than to brace one's self up to discover New South Wales—and then realize, with a gush of happy tears, that it was really old South Wales? This, at least, seems to me the main problem for philosophers; and it is, in a manner, the main problem of this book. **How can we contrive to be at once astonished at the world—and yet at home in it?** How can this queer cosmic town, with its many-legged citizens, with its monstrous and ancient lamps—**how can this world give us, at once, the fascination of a strange town and the comfort and honour of being our own town?** To show that a faith or a philosophy is true from every standpoint would be too big an undertaking, even for a much bigger book than this; it is necessary to follow one path of argument—and this is the path that I here propose to follow. I wish to set forth my faith as particularly answering this **double spiritual need: the need for that mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar which Christendom has rightly named romance.** For the very word “romance” has in it the mystery and ancient meaning of Rome. Any one setting out to dispute anything ought always to begin by saying what he does not dispute. Beyond stating what he proposes to prove, he should always state what he does not propose to prove. The thing I do not propose to prove—the thing I propose to take as common ground between myself and any average reader—is this desirability of an active and imaginative life, picturesque and full of a poetical curiosity: a life such as western man, at any rate, always seems to have desired. If a man says that extinction is better than existence, or blank existence better than variety and adventure, then he is not one of the ordinary people to whom I am talking. **If a man prefers nothing, I can give him nothing. But nearly all people I have ever met in this western society in which I live would agree to the general proposition that we need this life of practical romance: the combination of something that is strange with something that is secure.** We need so to view the world as to combine an idea of wonder with an idea of welcome. We need to be happy in this wonderland, without once being merely comfortable. It is *this* achievement of my creed that I shall chiefly pursue in these pages.

But I have a peculiar reason for mentioning the man in a yacht who discovered England. For I am that man in a yacht. I discovered England. I do not see how this book can avoid being egotistical; and I do not quite see—to tell the truth—how it can avoid being dull. Dullness will, however, free me from the charge which I most lament: the charge of being flippant. Mere light sophistry is the thing that I happen to despise most of all things; and it is, perhaps, a wholesome fact that this is the thing of which I am generally accused. I know nothing so contemptible as a mere paradox—a mere ingenious defence of the indefensible. If it were true (as has been said) that Mr. Bernard Shaw lived upon paradox, then he ought to be a mere common millionaire; for a man of his mental activity could invent a sophistry every six minutes. It is as easy as lying—because it is lying. The truth is, of course, that Mr. Shaw is cruelly hampered by the fact that he cannot tell any lie unless he thinks it is the truth. I find myself under the same intolerable bondage. I never, in my life, said anything merely because I thought it funny; though, of course, I have had ordinary human vain-glory, and may have thought it funny because I had said it. It is one thing to describe an interview with a gorgon or a griffin—a creature who does not exist. It is another thing to discover that the rhinoceros does exist, and then take pleasure in the fact that he looks as if he didn't. One searches for truth; but it may be that one pursues, instinctively, the more extraordinary truths. And I offer this book with the heartiest sentiments to all the jolly people who hate what I write, and regard it—very justly, for all I know—as a piece of poor clowning, or a single tiresome joke.

For if this book is a joke, it is a joke against me. I am the man who, with the utmost daring, discovered what had been discovered before. If there is an element of farce in what follows, the farce is at my own expense; for this book explains how I fancied I was the first to set foot in Brighton, and then found I was the last. It recounts my elephantine adventures in pursuit of the obvious. No one can think my case more ludicrous than I think it myself; no reader can accuse me here of trying to make a fool of him. I am the fool of this story, and no rebel shall hurl me from my throne. I freely confess all the idiotic ambitions of the end of the nineteenth century. I did, like all other solemn little boys, try to be in advance of the age. Like them, I tried to be some ten minutes in advance of the truth. And I found that I was eighteen hundred years behind it. I did strain my voice with a painfully juvenile exaggeration in uttering my truths. And I was punished in the fittest and funniest way; for I have kept my truths—but I have discovered, not that they were not truths, but simply that they were not mine. When I fancied that I stood alone, I was really in the ridiculous position of being backed up by all Christendom. It may be—Heaven forgive me—that I did try to be original; but I only succeeded in inventing, all by myself, an inferior copy of the existing traditions of civilized religion. The man from the yacht thought he was the first to find England; I thought I was the first to find Europe. I did try to found a heresy of my own; and when I had put the last touches to it, I discovered that it was orthodoxy.

Chesterton opens *Orthodoxy* with what sounds like a spoiler: a man who goes looking for something new and ends up discovering England. But that's not really the story. The real surprise isn't that he returned—it's *how* he returned.

What Chesterton describes isn't nostalgia. It's rediscovery.

He isn't saying, "I went back because the past was better."

He's saying, "I went forward so far that I finally learned how to see again."

One of the lines that stops me every time is this simple assumption: that the reader actually wants to live.

Chesterton writes as if his audience is curious, imaginative, restless, and alive. He says bluntly, "If a man prefers nothing I can give him nothing." And I think that's his quiet challenge to us. This book is not written for people who want existence reduced to utility, or life flattened into biology and consumption. It's written for people who still suspect that reality is larger than our explanations of

it.

Chesterton assumes wonder.

That's why fairy tales matter to him. Not because they are escapist, but because they train us to expect meaning, limits, danger, and gift. Elves and unicorns are not distractions—they're rehearsals for gratitude.

Then he does something even more revealing. He admits his own failure.

"I tried to be in advance of the age... and found that I was eighteen hundred years behind it."

That confession carries more weight than a dozen arguments. Chesterton isn't writing as a defender of a system. He's writing as a survivor. *Orthodoxy* is not an abstract apologetic; it's a record of escape—from despair, from intellectual pride, from the slow suffocation of meaning.

He saw where his age was going. An age intoxicated with progress but bored with existence. An age replacing wonder with control. An age mistaking cleverness for wisdom.

And here's the paradox that still matters:

Orthodoxy, which modern people assume is a prison, turns out to be the thing that frees the imagination.

Materialism, which promises liberation, quietly locks the doors from the inside.

Chesterton isn't asking us to stop thinking.

He's asking us to stop shrinking reality to fit our thinking.

I'm struck by how modern that still feels.

We live with the symptoms of nihilism without ever naming the disease. It arrives through screens, through politics, through a thousand quiet assumptions about what *can't* be true. And yet, like

Chesterton's traveler, many of us still feel the tug of home—even if we no longer recognize the road.

That longing, I think, is where this book begins.

Next time, Chesterton quietly dismantles the modern suspicion of fairy tales and shows how they preserve something our age is in danger of losing: the ability to be grateful that the world exists at all. *We'll be reading lines 377 through 491 of Orthodoxy (Project Gutenberg eBook no. 16769).*